



Harris County: *Marching Toward a Better Future*

November 2021

Judge Hidalgo's top priority is to advance ambitious initiatives that improve the lives of all residents in Harris County. Since January 2019, the County Judge's Office has taken bold, thoughtful action to improve flood control, reform our criminal justice system, and bring transparency, accountability, and efficiency to your government. Key accomplishments to date include:

Opening the Doors to County Government

- **Held the County's first-ever open transition process** with seven town hall meetings across Harris County and a survey that brought together 200+ community organizations and received 11,000 responses. The county is already acting on the many recommendations received from residents, including work to support the county's first-ever affordable housing plan, reforms to the juvenile justice system, and systems like the 3-1-1 line that residents said needed to exist so that they could more easily connect with government.
- **Ensuring County business is done out in the open.** Commissioners Court meetings are now in-depth, dynamic conversations routinely attended by community members rather than a brief formality.
- **Made voting easier by expanding access to the ballot box.** The County now allows residents to vote at any polling location on Election Day, not just their home precinct, and has expanded early voting hours and locations, including increased access for students with early voting polls opened at the University of Houston and Texas Southern University. For the historic 2020 election held in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Harris County made a \$17 million investment to triple the number of Early Vote locations and provide mail-in ballots. As a result, Harris County saw almost 70% turnout -- the highest in 30 years. The County also created an Elections Administrator Position to modernize Harris County elections and ensure voting is fair, efficient, secure, and accessible and approved funding of up to \$54 million for new, state-of-the-art voting machines.
- **Directed the county to create a 3-1-1 system** to make County services easier to reach.
- **Making sure Harris County is counted when it comes to the 2020 Census.** The County has committed a historic \$3.4 million dollars to Census efforts and launched our first-ever Houston-Harris County Complete Count Committee to ensure we receive our fair share of federal dollars.
- **Launched Harris Thrives, an initiative to execute a faster, fairer, and smarter flood control policy.** As part of this commitment, the County Judge's office is sharing real-time information on construction progress for flood bond projects, including how and where dollars are being spent at HarrisThrives.org.
- **Creating a better method to invest in public infrastructure.** In coordination with County Departments, Harris County is improving the process through which investments are determined for capital improvement

projects. Moving forward, the County will work in tandem with the communities they serve to gather input on where to invest and provide user-friendly information on where taxpayer dollars are being spent.

- Supported launch of an anonymous reporting system to help **identify fraud, waste or abuse in county government**. The hotline, accessible 24/7 via phone or online, allows individuals to report suspicious activity such as excessive or improper use of county assets.
- Created a commission to advise the county on how to **protect and celebrate African American history and culture** in Harris County.
- Allocated \$12 million to **significantly expand vote by mail** to ensure safe and accessible voting for seniors and residents impacted by COVID-19.
- **Launched reform of the budget process** and budget department to focus on performance-based budgeting and evaluate programs based on best-practices informed outcomes.
- **Implemented family-friendly workplace policies** proven to boost productivity and job satisfaction for all Harris County employees. Policies include up to 12 weeks paid parental leave for all new parents, additional sick leave to care for ill children, lactation rooms in county buildings, and resources for finding and selecting childcare.
- **Refinanced the Harris County Toll Road debt at historically low rates** to divert funds for urgent COVID-19 pandemic assistance and flood control projects, ensuring Harris County residents get the most beneficial return on their dollar.
- Committed **to improving coordination and information-sharing on environmental work with the City of Houston** by defining procedures for any future county-city partnerships for joint pollution monitoring, mitigation, investigations, and/or enforcement.
- **Created the Hispanic Cultural Heritage Commission** to advise the County on how to best serve the needs of our Hispanic population.
- **Created a Chief Talent Officer position** to oversee candidate searches and hiring processes that ensure we hire the best and brightest talent.
- **Ended the County's long-standing policy of "rollover" budgeting** for most general fund departments which allowed departments to hold on to budgeted and unspent funds indefinitely. Now unspent funds from the prior fiscal year are diverted to areas where they are most needed, like public safety, allowing for greater transparency in where and why the County's money is budgeted.
- Established the **new County Administrator position**, a management tool to ensure that planning and implementation are responsive to the goals and objectives of Commissioners Court, carried out effectively over time, and measured to determine whether intended outcomes are achieved.
- **Established Budget Management Department Diversity and Inclusion Policy** for Hiring of Third-party Firms.

Building a Culture of Resilience

- **Sped the delivery of flood bond projects** by allocating local funds to jump-start construction instead of waiting for federal match dollars. Out of more than 250 flood bond projects, more than half are already approved. Additionally, drainage improvement projects have been fast-tracked for the 105 subdivisions that were hard-hit by Hurricane Harvey and flooded due to poor drainage infrastructure.
- **Improving fairness by removing politics and financial influence from decision making on flood control projects.** The County Judge's office implemented a "worst first" model to inform which flood control bond projects to prioritize. While all bond projects will be completed, the County has begun using the Social Vulnerability Index developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to allow the county to prioritize areas that are particularly prone to disasters and economic loss.
- **Working to ensure that science — not politics — forms the foundation of improving resiliency.** From experimenting with floating wetlands to investing in technology to improve our flood warning system to make sure families know their true flood risk, the county is moving forward to lead the nation on how to protect communities from catastrophic flooding.
- **Acknowledging the reality of climate change,** the County has begun using the latest science from "Atlas-14," a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration rain model that ensures decisions we make on flood control measures are based on more accurate estimates of future flooding rather than what has happened in the past.
- **Passed the most stringent flood detention requirements possible** so that new development doesn't flood people downstream. Additionally, the County has streamlined the enforcement of floodplain regulations by allowing the County Attorney's office to pursue violators of floodplain regulations without Court approval.
- **Led successful response to Tropical Storm Imelda.** The County stood up Local Recovery Centers 25 days before the Federal disaster assistance center arrived to provide key resources for survivors. Judge Hidalgo also led the charge to secure Federal recovery dollars from FEMA. To date, FEMA has provided over \$8 million for Imelda survivors. Additionally, Judge Hidalgo secured access to low-interest federal disaster loans for the survivors of the Kingwood floods in May by working in partnership with Fort Bend County, the State of Texas, and the U.S. Small Business Administration.
- **Launched the Imelda Assistance Fund** in partnership with Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner. To date, the fund has raised over \$500,000 in donations and commitments to provide additional resources for survivors.
- **Commissioned an independent review of our emergency response systems** to continuously improve, identify and fill gaps when it comes to responding to future disasters. In response to this review, Judge Hidalgo has directed agencies to implement improvements, including improved air monitoring and information sharing.
- **Required all cities and municipalities in Harris County to meet more stringent floodplain development standards.** The policy change requires all 34 cities to adopt stricter rules as a condition of receiving \$2.5 billion in County flood bond funding.

- **Taking steps to develop a climate action plan for Harris County.** County officials are studying nationwide best practices to use in developing our own County Climate Action Plan (CAP).
- **Taking steps to transition to a green fleet.** County officials are working with Evolve Houston, a nonprofit focused on increasing vehicle electrification in Harris County, to conduct a fleet electrification analysis with the eventual goal of transitioning Harris County's fleet to electric vehicles.
- **Requiring that all new County facilities follow LEED energy efficiency standards.** Harris County currently owns and maintains 9 LEED Certified Buildings, including LEED Platinum for the first government facility in the gulf coast region.
- **Promoting sustainability in our infrastructure developments.** Harris County Engineering Department is a member of the Institute for Sustainable Infrastructure and employs more than 30 Envision Sustainability Professionals, a program that provides a holistic framework for evaluating and rating the community, environmental, and economic benefits of all types and sizes of infrastructure projects.
- **Transitioning to efficient, LED lighting.** A total of five projects for conversion to LED lighting in downtown buildings and facilities have been completed for \$900,000, with over \$1M in additional projects currently underway. Additionally, all of our Traffic signals now utilize LED signals.
- **Created an Office of Sustainability (OS)** to combat the underlying causes and disproportionate impact of climate change on marginalized communities by making community-driven improvements to air, water, and soil quality, committing to the use of clean energy, improving flood resilience with natural infrastructure practices, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and providing every resident access to quality green space.

Making Harris County a Better Place to Live and Work Everyone

- **Reformed environmental protection, monitoring, and enforcement.** The County has allocated over \$11 million to build a state-of-the-art air monitoring network, increased the size of the pollution control department by over 50%, and added resources for HazMat First Responders. The actions taken thus far represent the most significant enhancement of County environmental protections in at least 30 years.
- **Procured the RAAM,** a state-of-the-art van equipped with air quality-monitoring devices to detect pollutants in the air on blue-sky days, immediately identify harmful chemicals during emergency situations, and generate thermal images to locate chemical leaks and identify additional locations for low-cost fixed air monitors. This equipment will allow a faster response to chemical fire incidents.
- **Building up our Disaster Response Coordination Team** with the addition of an Operations Section Chief, a Senior Advisor for Public Safety and Emergency Management, a second industry liaison, and a social media specialist. These additions allow for better coordination with industry and County departments as well as improved communication with the public during incidents.
- **Allocated over \$1 million to create additional HCPH positions to assist with environmental health and emergency response,** including physicians, a chemical response planner, public health hygienist, an environmental toxicologist, and environmental epidemiologists.

- **Passed common-sense gun safety measures.** Despite continued roadblocks at the Federal and State level, the County has taken action to expand programs designed to keep weapons away from domestic violence abusers, expedite checks to keep gun dealers from unknowingly selling to people convicted of crimes, and encourage the use of gun locks to keep guns from the hands of children. The County has also established a task force on violence and injury prevention that will study gun violence.
- **Fought for better transit options.** Recognizing the need for innovative transit-oriented solutions instead of just wider highways, Judge Hidalgo fought to improve the TxDOT I-45 Expansion project, and will work with METRO to implement the new METRONext bond initiative. Additionally, the County is performing a first-ever countywide mobility needs assessment to ensure that future transportation development is coordinated, multimodal, and serves the needs of all Harris County residents.
- **Stood up against the Trump administration's effort to instill fear in our immigrant communities.** Judge Hidalgo has worked to fight against family separation policies, planned immigration raids in the County, and the inclusion of a citizenship question on the 2020 Census. Additionally, the County filed a successful amicus brief against the Federal Government's proposed "public charge rule" designed to threaten safety net services for immigrants and which would also overburden our county safety net systems.
- **Created a new, stand-alone Veterans Services Department.** The County doubled the budget for the Department and is collaborating with local organizations to ensure our veterans and their families receive the programs and services they have earned through service to our country.
- **Created a new, stand-alone Office of Economic Equity and Opportunity.** The department works across government departments to advance the long-term workforce and economic growth of our region and address the growing problem of income inequality. As part of this effort, the County commissioned the first-ever study to advise how to better support minority owned Minority/Women-owned business enterprises.
- **Launched a revamped ReadyHarris.org,** the County's flagship tool to inform residents on what to do before, during, and after disasters. The new site now includes user-friendly information on how residents can prepare for events and real-time alerts and information - like a live air monitoring map when needed - on what is happening to protect residents.
- **Raised the County minimum wage to \$15 an hour for employees and certain construction contract workers.** The County has also passed a more inclusive nondiscrimination policy, including sexual orientation and gender identity as protected classes.
- **Requiring those who do business with the County to support and protect workers.** The County is establishing criteria for evaluating safety records for workers when considering awards for construction contracts.
- **Expanded "Tow and Go" across Harris County** to reduce traffic congestion and secondary crashes by removing stalled vehicles from freeways for no cost to the driver. The service expanded from 175 miles of coverage to 245 miles of coverage through most of Harris County, including the unincorporated areas.

- **Established an Immigrant Legal Services fund** to inject fairness into our judicial system by providing immigrant families who cannot afford a lawyer with representation and legal services to ensure they are better prepared to navigate U.S. law and avoid deportation when warranted.
- **Reformed the way the county allocates transportation dollars** by replacing the outmoded ad hoc precinct-by-precinct system with a comprehensive county-wide approach intended to ensure better regional planning, effectiveness and transparency.
- **Published report on contracting disparities in Harris County** that showed profound disadvantages in county contracting for minority and women-owned firms. Economic Opportunity Department being created in part to address those issues.
- **Coordinated financial support for veterans during COVID-19 crisis.** The Harris County Veteran Services Department, in conjunction with the Texas Veterans Commission, received funding to provide short-term financial assistance for impacted veterans and their families.
- **Increased inspections of concrete batch plants to one per week for both air quality and stormwater quality.** Harris County Pollution Control Services (PCS) now inspects concrete batch plants within City limits, completing significantly more inspections than in the past, which better equips the County to hold plants accountable and identify instances of noncompliance.
- To ensure our partners are treating their employees fairly as well, the County is **establishing criteria for evaluating contracting firms' safety records for workers** when considering awards for construction contracts.
- **Established a \$30 million Small Business Recovery Fund (SBRF) Program to assist struggling small businesses** who have been unable to obtain financial assistance from other COVID-19 relief programs. The program will provide eligible businesses a grant of up to \$25,000 to help cover payroll costs, rent, accounts payable, and other operating expenses. SBRF targets businesses with 30 or fewer employees and is designed to assist the most vulnerable Harris County small- and micro-enterprises impacted by the pandemic with mounting financial burdens. The SBRF is in addition to a \$10 million fund Harris County established in April 2020 to provide grants for small businesses.
- **Established the COVID-19 Emergency Direct Assistance Program** to provide one-time payments of \$1,200 to families struggling with financial hardship related to COVID-19. Harris County and partner Catholic Charities completed a disbursement of \$61.4 million to a total of 51,167 eligible households. In June 2021, Harris County allocated an additional \$30 million to establish the **Harris County Recovery Assistance (HCRA) relief fund** to provide \$1,500 one-time payments to 20,000 households. This is in addition to **the COVID-19 Relief Fund** established in April 2020 to provide much-needed relief to Harris County residents hardest hit financially by the pandemic, and ineligible or unable to wait for other assistance. The fund distributed \$40 million in \$1,200 and \$1,500 grants to 18,659 applicants.
- **Established the COVID-19 Housing Legal Services Initiative** to provide legal assistance for families at risk of eviction due to financial hardships brought on by COVID-19.
- **Established the Houston-Harris County Emergency Rental Assistance Program** with the City of Houston to provide our hardest-hit residents with small grants to pay rent. As of November 4, 2021, the fund has acquired over \$244 million in funding and provided assistance to 62,761 families.

- **Established the \$8 million Eviction Intervention Program** to divert eviction cases out of court, helping families avoid imminent homelessness and landlords recover overdue rent during the pandemic.
- **Established a \$2.17 million COVID-19 Domestic Violence Assistance fund** to support survivors of domestic violence and help in providing an array of services including childcare, food, transportation, and housing during the pandemic.
- **Established the \$4.7 million COVID-19 Childcare Assistance Program** to provide some relief to parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. The program provided funding for virtual learning, after school care, early childhood learning, and early childhood care.
- **Fighting food insecurity caused by the pandemic** by pledging over \$15.8 million dollars as well as county manpower to the Houston Food Bank, which provided for the purchase and distribution of 47.5 million meals for Harris County families in need.
- **Created a Roadmap to Reopen Schools during the COVID-19 pandemic.** The research-based roadmap provided local school districts with data-based milestones to meet and safety guidelines to follow for realistic, responsible, safe, and sustainable reopening of schools.
- **Contributed \$18 million in federal funds to the COVID Community-wide Housing Plan** for local government and organizations to collaboratively address homelessness in the time of COVID-19. The contribution marks the single largest investment to address homelessness in Harris County history and will help provide housing services for 5,000 people.
- **Allocated \$5.5 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Emergency Housing Vouchers to expand support services** including move-in support, mental health and substance abuse services, and domestic violence-related services to assist people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness obtain and keep permanent housing.
- **Established the Harris County Digital Access Program** to provide families with computer devices and hotspots for virtual schooling. The program designates over \$42 million in Federal Cares Act dollars to provide 100,455 WiFi hotspots and 227,605 devices to families in need.
- **Created a new Broadband Office** to ensure that every Harris County resident has access to broadband internet access.
- **Invested 3.2 Million to continue providing free public wifi** to an estimated 20,000 families through the 2021-2022 school year at community centers, parks, libraries, and on community buses, and expand service to between 5,000 and 9,000 users.
- **Established an initiative to provide Harris County's contractors with free OSHA training and certification.**
- **Holding polluters accountable.** We've hired four dedicated environmental prosecutors to hold large industrial firms accountable in criminal court, and have dedicated pollution control investigators to inspect facilities that are not up to snuff.

- **Created a \$10 million early childhood education incubator** to make investments in high-impact early childhood initiatives and programs. This groundbreaking fund marks the first time Harris County has significantly invested in early childhood programs, which research demonstrates have one of the strongest returns on investment for any type of public program.
- **Increased property tax exemptions** for seniors and those with disabilities, expanding financial relief for more residents with limited or fixed incomes.
- **Tightened oversight of boarding houses to protect vulnerable seniors and persons with disabilities.** Regulations now allow Harris County to oversee permits requiring background checks for owners, operators, and volunteers, housing standards, fire/kitchen inspections and more.
- **Established the Greater Houston 2021 Winter Storm Relief Fund** to assist our region's most vulnerable neighbors in their recovery. The fund raised more than \$15 million in donations that has been distributed to non-profit organizations that support vulnerable families and individuals in critical need of home repairs due to busted pipes, water damage, and prolonged power loss during the recent freezing temperatures.
- **Paved the way for future development of hike and bike trails and green spaces by:**
 - Reaching an agreement with Centerpoint Energy securing the rights to construct 10 foot wide hike and bike trails within utility corridors and easements.
 - Conducting planning studies and developing detailed plans for trails along the toll road system and for construction of the historical Emancipation Trail.
 - Exploring green alternatives such as pedestrian, bikeway, and green space options for the Hardy Toll Downtown Connector corridor that fully take into consideration the local community and the region's existing and future transportation network.
- **Opened the new Harris County Pets Resource Center** to provide a state-of-the-art facility with three and a half times the amount of space as the original shelter that it replaced, increasing capacity to 525 animals.
- **Established the Harris County Healthy Food Financing Initiative** to mitigate the effects of food deserts and ensure access to nutritious food for all Harris County residents. To date, the Healthy Food Financing Initiative has awarded six local organizations working to further access to healthy foods and nutrition a total of \$550k in funding.
- Declared **Juneteenth** an official County holiday.
- **Fighting crime using an evidence-based three-part strategy**, which consists of the following three initiatives:
 - **Holistic Assistance Response Teams** of trained behavioral health and mental health professionals to respond to nonviolent police calls involving mental illness, substance use, homelessness, and social welfare.
 - **Reducing the dangerous backlog in our criminal court system** by procuring additional equipment for law enforcement agencies to help with evidence gathering and processing, budgeting for additional overtime to help staff get through cases, passing an emergency docket initiative to hire more judges and funding for an associate judges program, and expanded jury operations, and more.
 - **Gun Violence Interruption Program**, which connects with people at risk of committing violent crimes and connects them with services like mental health counseling, substance use treatment, employment, and support to exit gangs, while working with community leaders to identify ongoing

conflicts and using mediation techniques to resolve them peacefully.

- **Created the Clean Streets, Safe Neighborhoods program**, an evidenced-based crime prevention and neighborhood safety program to improve street lighting, sidewalks, and visibility and that addresses longstanding blighted and abandoned structures, restores vacant lots, and implements other improvements shown to enhance public safety.
- **Created the Healthy Minds, Healthy Communities initiative** to engage and collaborate with local leaders in vulnerable communities to provide mental health programming, skill development, training, and outreach.
- **Created a Child Tax Credit engagement program** in partnership with BakerRipley to conduct vital outreach to communities in need to ensure they file their taxes to claim the 2020 - 2021 elevated American Rescue Plan Child Tax Credit benefit.
- **Funded the County Connections Youth Summer Initiative** to support 43 nonprofit organizations in providing comprehensive summer programs, short term projects, and summer camps to 3,480 students at 99 sites across the County during Summer 2021.

Supporting A Smarter, Fairer Criminal Justice System

- **Fixing our broken cash-bail system.** By taking action to settle an expensive, three-year old lawsuit under which federal courts had deemed the County's bail system unconstitutional, the County eliminated practices that often made wealth the sole basis for how someone accused of a misdemeanor crime was treated. The County's work to protect the constitutional rights of defendants while protecting public safety is now recognized as a national model for other communities facing unfair bail practices.
- **Increased funding for the Public Defender's Office.** The budding office, first established in 2015, received a 91% increase in funding this year. It can now represent around 20% of the County's indigent criminal defendant population, significantly enhancing fair representation within our judicial system and moving us toward the best practice of a robust public defender's office that represents the majority of indigent criminal defendants.
- **Adopted a Managed Assigned Counsel Program for indigent defense.** The Court approved the adoption of this new indigent defense delivery model in our County Criminal Courts at Law. It will serve to oversee and enhance the independence, quality, and accountability of attorney appointments for indigent misdemeanor arrestees.
- **Stopped the construction of a new juvenile detention facility.** Instead of focusing resources on mass incarceration, the County is working to direct funds at evidence-based criminal justice reforms.
- **Established the Justice Administration Department.** The new department coordinates and serves as the hub for criminal justice reform in Harris County. Just three weeks after opening, it is already working to re-envision our Criminal Justice Coordinating Council as a vehicle for collaboration in a traditionally siloed system. It will also oversee implementation of misdemeanor bail reform and prioritize collection and analysis of criminal justice data to find ways to address inequities, reduce recidivism, lower crime, and save taxpayer dollars.

- **Passed a package of criminal justice reform measures in the wake of the killing of George Floyd**, including steps to create independent civilian oversight of police, humane use-of-force policies, the establishment of a violence interruption program, and public disclosure of use of force data and video footage. Additionally, the county is driving toward assigning at least 50% of indigent cases to public defenders within the next two years and is undergoing a deep, community-centered, examination of budgeting practices in the criminal justice system.
- **Created a package of initiatives to help the judicial branch of our government move through a backlog of criminal cases and address the violent crime rate**, including:
 - The **addition of six additional associate judges** to assist the 22 Criminal District Courts to process more cases simultaneously.
 - **Passed Emergency Docket Funding for \$2.5 million** to fund three visiting judges and necessary support staff.
 - The approval of **\$600,000 dollars in funds to expand jury operations** at NRG, making more jurors available to hear cases.
 - A major and historic **\$15 million investment in technology for law enforcement** which will make body cam systems more efficient -- consequently make video evidence available more quickly and speeding up processing of court cases.
 - **Allocated additional overtime funding for detectives** in the Harris County Sheriff's Office's Violent Crimes, Adult Special Crimes, and Child Abuse Units to work the most serious, violent cases with improved information sharing, expedited investigations, and targeted investigations focusing on repeat offenders and organized criminal activity in known hotspots.
- **Implemented much-needed reforms to our jury system** to promote increased participation in jury duty, including providing meal vouchers, free parking, distinct parking signage to help jurors find their way, free coffee and water, and an awareness campaign to draw attention to the changes.
- **Created a model policy to streamline the application process for a U visa** that helps make the visa certification process more consistent and easier to navigate for agencies and survivors.

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